

# salt 4:

Xaviera Simmons

November 18, 2011 – February 26, 2012

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fig. 1. Xaviera Simmons, *Composition One for Score A*, 2010, color photograph, courtesy the artist and Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, New York.

The figures we encounter in Xaviera Simmons's photographs are often on their way to someplace else. We catch them in transit: travelers, wanderers, migrants, and nomads. Some appear as expeditionists and explorers; others may be pilgrims, or gypsies, or drifters. All seem to inhabit a space somewhere between departure and arrival.

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In *Composition One for Score A* (2010), a stately figure cuts a stark silhouette against a pale desert sky (fig. 1). A hand on one hip, her other hand points into the distance—toward a dusty plateau, or simply toward an elsewhere, a beyond. In another desert scene, against a backdrop of craggy red rock, a traveler stands reading a map (fig. 2, *Maps*, 2010). (Simmons's characters are often seen looking at maps.) Navigating a path through the brush, the traveler pauses, the sun glinting off of her forehead. A camera, a duffle



fig. 2. Xaviera Simmons, *Maps*, 2010, color photograph, courtesy the artist and Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, New York.

bag, and some additional maps sit on the ground beside her. Look closely at the map she holds—just above where the lower corner is pulled back by a breeze—and the word “Utah” is visible. Yet this is not a photograph of Utah, any more than this is a portrait of Xaviera Simmons, who appears as the traveler holding the map. The specific locale is not important, Simmons will tell you. This landscape is a character in a story that has been told many times. It is laden with myth, embedded with histories.

Simmons’s photographs oscillate between the real and the staged, between the past and the present. Re-imagining collective mythologies and memories, her work generates new narratives, which often take on open-ended and non-linear forms. Simmons also revisits and reinterprets the scenes of earlier artists, and she is especially engaged with the legacies of American landscape painting and photography. It is perhaps difficult to imagine a time when the sweeping and sublime landscapes of the American West were not always already iconic. Indeed, the western landscape has served as the basis for various artistic movements, bodies of literature, the careers of several famous photographers, as well as a genre of Hollywood movie. Yet to many artists of 19th century America and its western frontier, the landscape was a blank slate—a place without a past.

Thomas Cole, the painter often described as the father of the Hudson River School of painting, once wrote, “The painter of American scenery has indeed privileges superior to any other; all nature here is new to art.” Many Hudson River School painters traveled west to paint scenes of red rock country—like that which serves as the backdrop for Simmons’s *Maps*—their work fueled by belief in a manifest destiny. In their landscapes, the twin national imperatives of spatial expansion and historical progress played themselves out in visible form. If Simmons no longer has the “privilege,” following Thomas Cole, of photographing a nature that is “new to art” (if it ever really was), the landscape is nonetheless ripe for appropriation. Her pictures conjure up past pictures, activating and revising them.

Sometimes Simmons employs models to play the characters in her photographs, but often she performs these roles herself. (Not insignificantly, she completed a two-year actor training conservatory with The Maggie Flanigan Studio in New York in 2006.) Her characters emerge through an accumulation of subtle and not-so-subtle details, from costumes to carefully placed props: in a couple of photographs she appears in black face—a gross caricature from the past, decontextualized and carried into the present—while in others, her attire gestures only ambiguously to other periods and places.

In a number of works, Simmons plays a character we might call “the photographer.” In *Canyon* (2010), for example, she stands at the edge of a canyon holding a 4x5 field camera, which she points at a scene we cannot see, beyond the frame’s edges (fig. 3). “The photographer” is the focal point of this picture; the steep slope of the mountain in the background leads our eye straight to her. The photograph alludes not just to representations of landscapes of the past, but also to their makers. Landscape painters, such as those of the Hudson River School, occasionally inserted miniscule portraits of themselves into a scene, providing a sense of scale, and also emphasizing their calling and their craft—that which enabled them to transform the materials of nature into the stuff of vision. (As in Cole’s *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm—The Oxbow of 1836*, fig.4.)



fig. 3. Xaviera Simmons, *Canyon*, 2010, color photograph, courtesy the artist and Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, New York.



fig. 4. Thomas Cole (American, 1801–1848), *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm—The Oxbow*, 1836, detail, oil on canvas, Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of Mrs. Russell Sage.



fig. 5. Carleton Watkins, *Primitive Mining. The Old Rocker, (self-portrait as a miner)*, c. 1883, albumen silver print, California State Library, Sacramento.

That Simmons appears as so many different characters in her work seems fitting given the history of the West as a place where so many were lured by the promise of self-reinvention—including artists themselves. It is practitioners of landscape photography that her “photographer” seems to reference most pointedly. When Carleton Watkins, one of the earliest and greatest landscape photographers, made a portrait of himself in 1883, he posed as a gold miner, playing a character just as Simmons does (fig. 5, *Primitive Mining. The Old Rocker, (self-portrait as a miner)*, c. 1883). More famous, of course, are the many heroic portraits of photographer Ansel Adams, positioned behind his large format camera in dramatic locales in the wilderness. While it may seem almost too obvious to

point out certain glaring commonalities among the aforementioned artists—from the Hudson River School to Watkins and Adams—sometimes the most obvious things are the ones that appear natural, and thus unremarkable, even invisible. By playing the character of “the photographer,” inserting herself into the picture, Simmons’s presence as a woman of African, European, and Native American descent throws into relief the fact that the role of the landscape painter, or landscape photographer, was previously, almost exclusively, occupied by generations of white men. Simmons’s usurpation of this role, then, is another means by which to produce new narrative possibilities, opening a space for new characters, new stories. Such characters, such stories, already exist, but have largely remained outside the frame, excluded from official histories and sanctioned imagery. “When you deal with the histories of America,” Simmons has said, “you automatically fall into the histories of immigrants and migrants, and that’s how you can enter into other characters, narratives, and geographies.”<sup>1</sup>

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Simmons was trained as a photographer, but her practice takes various meandering forms, including sculpture, installation, performance, and sound art. Early in her career, she spent two years on a walking pilgrimage with Buddhist monks, retracing the trans-Atlantic Slave trade. For a project in Peekskill, New York a few years ago, she made a site-responsive work, a path of colored stones that represented a stream running underground, extending from Peekskill to the Hudson River. In addition to landscapes, she has created soundscapes, immersive environments incorporating murals composed of the sleeves of vintage LP records of jazz, soul, and hip-hop, which visitors listened to. (Simmons is also a noted D.J.) Diverse as these activities may sound, her practice returns again and again to passages through space and time. The stories her work tells unfold temporally, like a journey, inviting us to come along.

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in “Hot Shots: A Selection from Photography’s New Guard,” *Modern Painters*, November 2010.



fig. 6. Xaviera Simmons, *Wilderness*, 2010, installation view, courtesy the artist and Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, New York.

A exemplary work in this regard is *Wilderness* (2010), which conjures a landscape akin to those depicted in her photographs, if through different means (fig. 6). The work takes the form of a wall-bound sculpture comprising hundreds of pieces of found wood scraps, each one bearing words and phrases painted in bold lettering. These wooden pieces suggest vernacular signage, but the words they carry are more broadly evocative, culled from notes, conversations, travel journals, news articles, folklore, poetry, and literature. Here a series of names of objects establish a vague setting (“a rattan easy chair/ a writing table/ mosquito nets”), while weather conditions and natural phenomena (“rain/ the wind/ waves/ archipelagos/ forests”) suggest sensory impressions. There are fragments of narrative here, too (“photograph of us on a boat in the full moonlight”), as if these wooden pieces are signposts for personal memories. *Wilderness* requires our participation as viewers, if only to read the words, which takes time—we cannot perceive the work all at once. The act of seeing and reading becomes performative, as we parse a sense of a place—in effect, a landscape—from this wilderness of words.



fig. 7. Xaviera Simmons, *Superunknown (Alive in The)*, 2010, installation view, c-prints mounted on Sintra, courtesy the artist and Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, New York.

This essay began with an assertion that the figures that populate Simmons's photographs are often travelers, on their way to someplace else. One final work is worth mentioning in this regard, for it seems to distill many of the artist's key strategies and concerns, even as it may represent a new direction in her work. *Superunknown (Alive in The)* (2010) is an installation, a large-scale montage, consisting of forty-two found photographs of migrants traveling by boat in the open sea (fig. 7). Drawn from newspapers, travel magazines, and the websites of organizations like Human Rights Watch, the photographs depict people who have left their lives behind for a journey into the unknown. Like Simmons's other photographic work, this one engages tactics of appropriation, and like her wall sculpture, *Wilderness*, it is produced through a process of accumulation. More significantly, however, the condition of being mobile, uprooted, in transit, is—through the repetition and reframing of this subject—posited as a more universal condition than we might otherwise like to imagine. If Simmons's work often focuses on nationalism and the American landscape,



it is worth recalling that many of this nation’s early settlers arrived as “boat people.” The condition of being uprooted, indefinitely situated between departure and arrival, is nonetheless disturbing to nationalist ideals, as it blurs the boundaries that define nation states. It also perforates the lines between “us” and “them.” Ultimately, this seems to be a central aim of Simmons’s work. Her characters invoke a state of being between past and future identities, of being outside the established order—which is to say, a state of possibility.

—Jill Dawsey, Chief Curator  
Utah Museum of Fine Arts

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**Xaviera Simmons** was born in New York City and currently lives and works in New York and Paris. She received a BFA in photography from Bard College in 2004. Simmons completed the Whitney Museum of American Art’s Independent Study Program in Studio Art (2005) concurrent with a two-year actor-training conservatory with The Maggie Flanigan Studio (2006). Major exhibitions and performances include The Museum of Modern Art (2011); MoMA PS1; The Studio Museum In Harlem; The Nasher Museum Of Art at Duke University (2010); The Sculpture Center, New York (2009); and The Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston (2008). Simmons is a recipient of The David Driskell Prize, a Jerome Foundation Travel/Study Fellowship, and an Art Matters Fellowship among others. She is one of three 2011-2012 Artists In Residence at The Studio Museum In Harlem, and she will travel to Colombo, Sri Lanka in 2012 as part of The U.S Department of State’s smART Power Initiative.

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salt (sôlt)

n.

1. A colorless or white crystalline solid used extensively in ground or granulated form as a food seasoning and preservative
2. An element that gives flavor or zest
3. Sharp, lively wit
4. A mineral sharing definitive characteristics with Utah's capital city